

THE LABORING SUN

Introduction

Advent has always been of special significance to the Roman Catholic Church. Whereas Protestants focus on the substitutionary Atonement of Jesus Christ, and while Orthodox Christians dwell on His Resurrection at Easter, the Catholic Church is more so than others the Church of the Incarnation. It is for this reason that the Eucharist occupies the place of honor among all the traditional forms of Catholic worship. It is for this same reason that veneration of the great Mother of God is so vital a component of Catholic spirituality, for the life of Mary is no less than a parable which teaches how each of us can become a *theotokos*, that is a God-bearer. At the same time, Mary illustrates our relationship to each member of the Trinity, for she is not only the Mother of God the Son, but also the Daughter and Handmaid of the Father and the Bride of the Holy Spirit.

Mary the Living Tabernacle

When an angel appeared to Joseph to announce that his betrothed was to conceive a son by the power of the Holy Spirit, he repeated the prophecy of Isaiah saying:

“The virgin shall be with child
and give birth to a son,
and they shall call him Emmanuel,”
a name which means “God with us.”
-Mt 2:23

The significance of this name with respect to Mary is highlighted by the angel Gabriel's salutation: "Hail Mary, full of grace! The Lord is with you (Lk 1:28)." From these verses of Scripture it becomes clear that Mary, as the most highly favored daughter of God, was predestined from all eternity to be His living tabernacle in a way unsurpassed by any other human being. Mary, as the archetype of Israel and the Church, is the representative of the people of God. She is, herself, the new Ark of the Covenant, as may be inferred from various texts in Holy Scripture.

The Song of Songs, which portrays the mutual love between Yahweh and His people as that between a man and his betrothed, speaks of Mary, the Bride of the Holy Spirit, as a dwelling place when it proclaims:

I am as dark- but lovely,
O daughters of Jerusalem-
As the tents of Kedar,
as the curtains of Salma.
Do not stare at me because I am swarthy,
because the sun has burned me."
-Sng 1:5-6

The Book of Revelation uncovers the hidden meaning of these verses as it describes the following vision:

Then God's temple in heaven opened, and in the temple could be seen

the ark of His covenant. There were flashes of lightning and peals of thunder, an earthquake, and a violent hailstorm. A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. Because she was with child, she wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth.

-Rev 1119-122

In this passage we see that the woman clothed with the sun is identified with the Ark of the Covenant. The sun represents not her own glory but that of the child she bears, who is the "sun of righteousness" (Mal 4:2). It is the moon which is most symbolic of the woman's person, for its light is but the reflected light of the sun, just as the light of the Church is but the reflected light of the Lord Jesus. The crown of twelve stars represents the twelve tribes of Israel, hence the people of God. The Gospel of Luke reinforces the view that Mary is the new Ark of the Covenant in its account of the Visitation (Lk 1 :39-45), the details of which evoke King David's transfer of the ark to Jerusalem (2 Sm 6:9-15) after its recovery from the Philistines.

Mary the Immaculate Mother

If Mary was destined to be a holy and living tabernacle for her divine Son, she had to be free from any stain of original sin, for otherwise Jesus would have taken on a fallen human nature. Indeed, the body and blood which He inherited from His Blessed Mother could never have been the precious and acceptable offerings that they were had Mary known any kind of sin. If Mary was saved from the consequences of the Fall, it was solely because her Son was predestined to die in atonement for the sins of mankind. Thus the dogma of the Immaculate Conception is as much a statement about Christ as the perfect sacrificial victim as it is a statement about Mary's holiness.

The Song of Songs attests to the immaculate nature of the Mother of God, for the bridegroom of the song refers to his beloved when he says:

You are altogether beautiful, my darling,
and there is no blemish in you.

-Sng 4:7

and again:

Under the apple tree I awakened you;
it was there that your mother conceived you.

-Sng 8:5

The apple tree is nothing other than the tree of life, that is God Himself, for earlier in the song the bride refers to the groom as "an apple tree among the trees of the woods (Sng 2:3)." In other words, Eve, the mother of all the living spiritually conceived Mary under the tree of life rather than under the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, that is before she had committed the first sin. That Mary is the only child of Eve who possesses this privilege is clear from the following verse:

There are sixty queens, eighty concubines,

and maidens without number-
But my dove, my perfect one, is unique.
She is her mother's only daughter.
She is the pure child of her parent.
The maidens saw her and called her blessed-
the queens and concubines also,
and they sang her praises."

-Sng 6 :8-9

In the Septuagint, the root word used for "blessed" is the same word in the Greek New Testament ascribed to Elizabeth when she praised Mary thus:

Blessed is she who trusted that the
Lord's word to her would be fulfilled.

-Lk 1:45

Note that the bridegroom refers to his beloved as a dove. Doves were sacrificial victims in Jewish ritual, particularly in the purification of a woman after childbirth (Lev 12:1-8). When Jesus was presented in the temple, Mary underwent this ceremonial purification, and as part of the ritual presented two doves for sacrifice, one for a sin offering, and the other for a holocaust. Both had to be unblemished animals. The dove of the sin offering represented Jesus as the perfect redeemer of mankind, while the dove of the holocaust represented the Church, typified by Mary, which had been made acceptable to God by the sin offering. Just as Jesus underwent the redemption ceremony as the first-born male though He Himself needed no redemption from sin, so did Mary submit to the demands of the Mosaic Law though she needed no purification for having borne the unblemished Son of God.

Mary the Glorious Queen

When God sent His only begotten Son into the world, He did so not only that we might be saved from eternal punishment, but also that we might share in the glory of His Son. Hence, we too are meant to receive glorified bodies and to rule creation jointly with Christ, for as St. John wrote:

I will give the victor the right to sit
with me on my throne, as I myself won
the victory and took my seat beside
the Father on His throne."

-Rev 3:21

Mary, as the most radically redeemed person in the history of the world, experienced the Resurrection of her son in a way granted to no other creature. The Song of Songs speaks of her Lord as saying to her:

Arise, my beloved, my beautiful one and come!
O my dove in the cleft of the rock,
in the secret recesses of the cliff,
Let me see you, let me hear your voice,
For your voice is sweet, and you are lovely.
-Sng 2:13-14

Because Mary was immaculately conceived, God did not allow her to suffer corruption in the tomb. Rather, she received her glorified body before anyone else and was assumed into heaven, where she now reigns as Queen and co-ruler with Christ. The author of the Book of Esther foreshadowed this when he wrote:

The king loved Esther more than all other women,
and she found favor and kindness with him more
than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown
on her head and made her queen...
-Est 2:17

Mary the Mediatrix of Grace

Mary is not only the Queen of Heaven, but also the Mother of the Church, for as Eve conceived Mary under the tree of life, so did Mary conceive the Church under the foot of the cross. It was there at the foot of the cross that Jesus said to His beloved disciple, "There is your mother." (In 19:27), thus incorporating His most intimate friend into His own earthly family. Jesus extends this very same privilege to those whom He loves in a special way.

As our Mother, Mary's function is to lead us to Jesus and to clothe us with His grace so that we might grow more and more into His likeness. Like Rebekah who clothed Jacob in Esau's garments so that he might receive the blessing reserved for Isaac's first-born son (Gen 27:15-16), Mary wraps us in the swaddling clothes of her Son's righteousness so that we might share in His birthright as the only begotten Son of God.

Mary, our Mother, is also the Bride of the Holy Spirit. As such, she administers to us the water of eternal life of which her Son spoke in his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well (In 4:1-42). When Abraham's servant sought a bride for his master's son, Isaac, he prayed:

While I stand here at the spring and the daughters
of the townsmen are coming out to draw water,
if I say to a girl, "Please lower your jug that I may
drink," and she answers, "Take a drink, and let me
give water to your camels, too." let her be the one
whom You have decided upon for your servant Isaac.
-Gen 24:13-14

Mary, as the woman prefigured by Isaac's bride, Rebekah, offers us a drink of water from the well of her Spouse, the Holy Spirit. It is she who tends God's vineyard, the Church, for the bride of the Song of Songs proclaims:

My vineyard is at my own disposal;
the thousand pieces are for you, O Solomon,
and the two hundred for the caretakers of its fruit.
-Sng 8:11-12

The groom, on the other hand, refers to his bride when he says:

You are an enclosed garden, my sister, my bride,
an enclosed garden, a fountain sealed...
You are a garden fountain, a well of water
flowing fresh from Lebanon.
-Sng 4:12,15

This water is available to us as Mary's children, for it is to us that the Book of Revelations offers us this invitation:

The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come !".
Let him who hears answer, "Come!".
Let him who is thirsty come forward;
let all who desire it accept the gift
of life-giving water."
-Rev 22:17

In addition to being our Mother, Mary is also our advocate before her Son. She constantly intercedes on our behalf in the same way that she implored Jesus to change water into wine at Cana (John 2:1-11). Her role as Mediatrix of Grace however, does not eclipse that of Christ as "the one mediator between God and men (1 Tim 2:5)," for as at Cana she says to us concerning her Son, "Do whatever he tells you."

Mary Co-Redemptrix

The Book of Genesis records that after the serpent had tempted Eve to sin by eating of the forbidden tree, the Lord God said to the serpent:

I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
He will strike at your head,
while you strike at his heel.
-Gen 3:15

This verse is often understood as the first promise of a Redeemer for fallen mankind. The Vulgate, however, substitutes the pronouns, "she" and "her", for "he" and "his". This particular rendering of the verse leads to the interpretation that Mary, who is the new Eve, participates in Christ's work of redemption and therefore shares in His victory over Satan.

That men can cooperate in the work of salvation is made clear by St. Paul, for he wrote:

In my own flesh I fill up what is lacking
in the sufferings of Christ for the sake
of the body, the Church.

-Col 1 :24

This does not, however, detract from the merits of Christ's atonement. Rather, in the words of the famous Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain,¹ "The Incarnate Word has willed that men save the world with Him not indeed by adding anything to His merits and His Blood, but by applying through their suffering and their love... His infinite merits and His redemptive Blood all along the course of time." Thus we, like Simon of Cyrene who helped Our Lord carry His cross, can as members of His Mystical Body aid Him as instruments in the salvation of the world. Mary, too, participates in this work of suffering and redemption as is evident from the words spoken to her by the prophet Simeon:

...and you yourself shall be pierced
with a sword so that the thoughts of
many hearts may be laid bare."

-Lk 2 :35

In the Old Testament, Judith defeated the Assyrian general Holofernes, and Esther brought about the destruction of Haman, the enemy of her people. Mary, too shall crush the head of her adversary with her heel, and thus accomplish God's saving plan for the world. This mortal conflict between herself and the devil is pictured in the Book of Revelation as follows:

Then another sign appeared in the sky:
it was a huge dragon, flaming red, with
seven heads and ten horns; on his heads
were seven diadems. His tail swept a third
of the stars from the sky and hurled them
down to the earth. Then the dragon stood
before the woman about to give birth, ready
to devour the child when it should be born.

-Rev 12:3-4

The well-known image of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, when looked at from the point of view of Mary's co-redemptive work, reveals a profound mystery, for this suffering unblemished heart of love, pierced through with the sword of calumny and indifference on the part of sinful men will, together with the Sacred Heart of her Son, bring about yet a Second Advent. Now is the period of gestation wherein Mary's Immaculate Heart is supplying the needs of the child within her womb, which is the Mystical Body of a renewed Church waiting to be born. Her adversary, the Dragon, awaits anxiously, "ready to devour the child" when it comes. In the end, however, Mary and her Son will prevail, and those words from the Book of Judith will again resound:

¹ Jacques Maritain, *On the Grace and Humanity of Jesus* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969),p.33.

You are the glory of Jerusalem,
the surpassing joy of Israel;
You are the splendid boast of our people.
With your own hand you have done all this;
You have done good to Israel, and God
is pleased with what you have wrought.
May you be blessed by the Lord Almighty
forever and ever!"

-Jud 15:9-10

Conclusion

The Gospel according to St. Matthew mentions four women apart from Mary in its genealogy of the Messiah: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba (Mt 1 :1-17). All four of these women were either foreign or scandalous figures, who nevertheless merited the distinction of being forerunners of the Mother of God. Mary, too after all, was and continues to be something of a scandal to men. The fact that she was found to be with child before her marriage to Joseph must have been cause enough for hostility and suspicion. Nowadays, the veneration that Catholics give to Mary and their beliefs regarding her special privileges are taken by outsiders as sufficient indication that the Church is no less than the "harlot of Babylon". But Tamar too was thought to be a prostitute. Yet when she presented Judah's staff and seal, her lord recognized her as the legitimate mother of his son (Gen 38:12-26).

Mary is, in some sense, the signet ring of the Church, her seal of truth against heresy (Sng 8:6-7). That Catholics appreciate her role in the economy of salvation is proof that the fullness of the Christian faith is to be found nowhere else but in the Church. The Song of Songs, that incomparable book that, more than any other, sings of the glories of Mary, also sings of the fidelity of the Catholic Church, the true spouse of Jesus Christ, when it says of His bride:

If she is a wall, we will build upon it a silver parapet.
If she is a door, we will reinforce it with a cedar plank.
I am a wall, and my breasts are like towers.
So now in his eyes I have become one to be welcomed."

-Sng 8:9-10

The Church, like the perpetual Virgin Mother of God, is truly a wall that keeps out all error, all untruth, all pollution. Like the walls of Nehemiah and those of the New Jerusalem, it offers no door to those who would destroy the deposit of faith that she inherited from the Master and His apostles. The time will come when Mary will again rise to the occasion and gather the flock of her Son back into a single fold that will acknowledge the same Savior, Jesus Christ, as Lord over all. That time draws near and is perhaps already now.

--Eduardo P. Olaguer